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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 004919

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2010
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [AE](#)
SUBJECT: UAE: LIMITED POLLS A PRELUDE TO DIRECT ELECTIONS

REF: ABU DHABI 4905

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MICHELE J. SISON, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

1. (U) Summary: The UAE's Supreme Ruling Council on December 3 endorsed President Sheikh Khalifa's reform initiative that includes a plan for indirect elections of half of the Federal National Council (FNC), with the other half being appointed. President Khalifa also announced that the decision to elect half the FNC membership is just a first step, and that direct elections would follow. He specifically mentioned the participation of women. The Supreme Ruling Council's other significant decision was to set up a National Security Council that will evaluate and respond to threats to the UAE.
End Summary.

2. (U) President Khalifa has elaborated on his reform plan first unveiled December 1. He announced the following day that the decision to elect half of the FNC's membership by local councils in each emirate while appointing the second half is just the first step in what would be a broader reform policy. He said each emirate ruler in the seven emirates will appoint a local council that will be at least 100 times larger than its number of FNC seats. Thus, Abu Dhabi, with 8 FNC seats, will have a local council with at least 800 members. The local council of "super-electors" -- including dignitaries, tribal chiefs and other influential figures in society -- will then elect from either within or outside their ranks half of the FNC. The Rulers of each emirate will

appoint the other half. Currently, Abu Dhabi and Dubai have 8 seats each, Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah six, and Ajman, Fujairah, and Umm Al Qaiwain four. (Note: The UAEG had announced December 1 that there would be a total of 2,000 members of local councils. Based on President Khalifa's amplification, that number would be 4,000. End note.) In the past, the Constitution left it up to the individual emirates to select their respective FNC members.

¶3. (U) President Khalifa also announced that he would submit a proposal to the FNC during its next session recommending amendments to the UAE constitution. These amendments would give greater power to the FNC, increase the FNC's membership to match with the population increase, and lengthen legislative terms. Khalifa specifically said that the amendments were intended to prepare for direct elections. He also said that he was looking forward to more reforms on various levels of power. "The decision to introduce these reforms stems from the firm conviction of the UAE leadership on the importance of achieving wider and more effective participation of the citizens, men and women, in the building and development of the country," he said. (Note: The president had not specifically mentioned direct elections or the participation of women in his December 1 announcement. End note.) The Supreme Ruling Council endorsed President Khalifa's reform plan on December 3 and directed the concerned authorities to immediately begin its implementation.

¶4. (U) The FNC is the UAE's primary consultative body and all federal draft laws and decrees must go through it before they are officially adopted by the Supreme Ruling Council. (Draft legislation is prepared by the relevant UAEG ministry.) While the FNC does not have the power to reject legislation, it can send it back to the cabinet for amendment. The FNC also has the authority to question any government minister. Currently, the 40 FNC members serve two-year terms. The timetable for the elections is not yet known, although UAE officials quoted in the press have indicated that the process of selecting local councils would start early next year. The federal Cabinet will prepare a bill and send it to the FNC, which upon approval will send it back to the Cabinet. The Cabinet then forwards the bill to the president, who signs it after ratification by the Supreme Ruling Council.

¶5. (C) For the first time since President Khalifa's December 1 announcement concerning the FNC membership selection process, a few UAE political figures and academics have expressed their reservations about the new reform plan. Commenting on the decision to broaden political participation, human rights activist/lawyer Mohammed Al Rukn told us that as long as the FNC is not given more powers and FNC members are not elected directly by the citizens, the "so-called new process ... is a PR gesture." Al Rukn also told "Gulf News" that voting rights should be granted to all citizens and a "strong" legislative authority established. Academic Mohammed bin Huwaidin told "Gulf News" that the local councils experience "falls short of our aspirations for direct elections." Habiba Al Marashi, an environmental activist, was quoted by "Al Bayan" as saying that she hoped the new council "will give UAE women their deserved rights so that they can keep up with the developments regionally and internationally." Ali Jassem, who has served in the FNC as a representative from Umm Al Qaiwain Emirate for the past 12 years, told Ambassador December 4 that he intends to stand for office again. Assuming he is selected, he said he plans to stand up in the council chambers and ask some provocative questions about the number of foreigners in the UAE, the reason why there are two foreign ministers (a Minister of Foreign Affairs and a Minister of State for Foreign Affairs), and whether the president or someone else is running the country.

A New National Security Council

¶6. (U) Also on December 3, the Supreme Ruling Council agreed to establish a National Security Council. According to statements from the UAE official news agency, the UAEG

studied how other countries addressed their national security in order to find the best methods for the protection of the UAE's security. "This step will boost the drive toward institutionalization by bringing together all the concerned bodies under one central agency that can handle current and future challenges effectively," Interior Minister Sheikh Saif bin Zayed said. The main function of the council would be to "safeguard the UAE's accomplishments and preserve its security and stability," he added. There were no details about who would be named the new national security czar.

Democracy Developments on Other Fronts

¶7. (U) As the headlines heralded the UAE's "march towards full democratic participation" ("Gulf News" Dec. 3) and "UAE is at the threshold of a new era" (&Gulf News" Dec. 2), Abu Dhabi residents gazed up at new billboards of candidates contesting the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry's first-ever board elections, which were scheduled for December ¶5. Approximately 50,000 members of the chamber were to elect 15 members in a direct ballot, the first-ever elections to the chamber board.

¶8. (U) On December 5, the "Gulf News" reported an interview with a senior Education Ministry official who said that, starting next year, democracy would be part of the elementary school curriculum. Once children are in the sixth grade, they will receive more practical training by forming a model parliament where they will "learn the skills of debate and accepting others' opinions," said Obaid Al Muhairi, director of education and curriculum development center at the Ministry of Education.

Comment:

¶9. (C) Khalifa's public statement that direct elections are where the UAE is headed is a positive development. While the announced reforms are not equivalent to a one-person, one vote election system, it is an important first step in introducing Emirati nationals to the electoral process in anticipation of genuine democratic reforms. These gradual developments are ushering in a new openness, such as the questions FNC veteran Ali Jassem said he would raise if selected to the FNC)- questions mostly unheard of before President Sheikh Zayed's death.

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